The Sanctity of Table-Waiting
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Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16
Acts 2:43–47, 6:1–7
John 15:16

“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”
John 15:16 (NRSV)

On the face of it, Christianity had little to commend it. It sprang from an insignificant corner of the empire, far distant from the capital city, Rome. Its roots lay in the despised Judaism, and its founder had been executed by that most demeaning of deaths, crucifixion. It had, at least at first, attracted the least influential members of society. . . . Christianity, then, presents the historian with something of a paradox.

Michael Walsh
***The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded*.**

You have created this beautiful wonderful world and filled it with life. You have loved this world so much you breathed your own Spirit into it, loved it so much as to send your only Son to live in it. Thank you. Thank you for this beautiful May morning, for this church, this hour together, the dear people sitting around us, and for your love which sustains us every day of our lives. Startle us again, O God, with the miracle of life. Amen

In 1970 a management consultant and scholar of management wrote an essay that reverberated through the corporate and business world and opened a new window on how we think about the all-important topic of leadership.

His name was Robert Greenleaf. He spent most of his career in management, research, and development at AT&T. The name of his essay was “The Servant as Leader” and coined the now-familiar term “servant leadership.”

The concept has actually been around a long time. The first mention I know of is in the description of an event that happened around the year thirty-five, when the earliest Christians had to address themselves to the matter of leadership.

You know, one of the great puzzles of history is how and why Christianity happened. Its beginnings could not have been more modest or less promising, springing from an insignificant backwater of the Roman Empire, its founder executed. And yet in seventy years, by the end of the first century, Christianity had spread through most of Palestine and Syria, Greece, Italy, Turkey, and the coast of Egypt.

By 200, half of Spain and France, Eastern Europe, and North Africa were Christian.

In another one hundred years, Christianity had spread west to Britain and east into Iraq and Iran.

As Michael Walsh observes, it is one of history's greatest paradoxes and puzzles.

While I was away recently, I took along a book with the intriguing *title Why Christianity Happened*. The author, James Crossley, sets out to examine the question from the perspective of a secular historian. He comes to some interesting conclusions: economic conditions influenced the rise of the Jesus movement. There was a small and wealthy elite class and a huge and very poor peasant class. The Jesus movement was enormously popular with the peasants. But, number two, Crossley concludes, Jesus was not a revolutionary, but seemed to care about both the poor and the well to do.

Number three: Monotheism was gaining in popularity and interest: God is one, there is one God, not many.

Number four: There was, for the first time in history, a massive and efficient transportation and communication network thanks to the Roman road system. The time was ripe for the spread of an idea.

As I was enjoying reading about all the plausible historical theories on the question of Christianity's origin, I was doing the other thing I always do when I am away, reading cover to cover a book of the Bible. By happy coincidence the book I had chosen to read was the Acts of the Apostles. So early in the morning I'd begin with Crossley and read about the economic and sociological forces that contributed to the rise of Christianity. And then I'd pick up Acts and read about the Holy Spirit and Pentecost and Peter and John arrested and hauled into court; Saul persecuting believers and then, knocked off of his horse and blinded, becoming a Christian and a passionate missionary and traveling throughout the entire Roman Empire on foot and by boat preaching, starting churches. Barnabas and Silas and John Mark and Timothy; harrowing voyages and shipwrecks, civil disturbances, jail breaks, and political arguments; a great compromise; a sermon that went on so long into the night, a little boy sitting in a window trying to listen, fell asleep and tumbled three stories to his death, Paul raised him from the dead and resumed preaching until dawn. (I like that one particularly.) I also observed that many of the issues the earliest church struggled with sounded very relevant and contemporary to me.

So I concluded that the question "Why did Christianity thrive and grow so dramatically?" was worth a little bit of our time.

I have chosen a series of incidents and anecdotes to start our thinking, beginning this morning with the first election in the Christian church and the first ordination.

It's about 35 CE: the first believers are still in Jerusalem, the twelve apostles and a growing number of adherents. They went to the temple a lot; they stayed close together, for moral support and security. They prayed a lot and apparently were conspicuously happy. There is a lovely, idyllic description of them: "All who believed

were together and had all things in common—they spent time together in the temple, they broke bread at home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

And in the midst of that lovely picture someone lodges a complaint. With all that glad and generous hearts business, you're forgetting something. The widows, those most vulnerable people of all, are not getting any food. In all that praying and praising you're overlooking a small but critical detail: the most vulnerable and powerless ones are hungry.

So the twelve apostles call a meeting—the first congregational meeting—and they say, we're too busy; we don't have time to wait on tables. Let's have an election. So the community selects seven people to wait on tables and serve bread to the widows, and they gather around the seven, and adopting an ancient Jewish custom, they lay hands on them. The result: "The word of God continued to spread: the numbers of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem." And I think it was because the first Christians discovered something important and true about leadership.

First: leadership arises from below, not descends from above. The community selected these seven. The apostles didn't appoint them. It's a small detail, but so revolutionary, so utterly new that the whole of history mostly goes in the opposite direction: authority from top down—emperors and kings on top, subjects on the bottom. It took the early church about 200 years to forget that principle and revert to hierarchy, an empire model for its own governance. But, here at the very beginning, a seed, a tiny seed of a new way of thinking about how things are meant to work in this world, people selecting from among their own members leaders to whom the community itself gives authority. It's no wonder the idea took a very long time to gain traction. It's revolutionary; it literally turns the status quo upside down. Think of when and where it has emerged: Magna Carta; sixteenth-century Geneva, with John Calvin insisting that people have the God-given right to elect public officials; Mayflower Compact; Declaration of Independence; Czechoslovakian Spring; the dock workers at Gdansk, Poland; East German people in Leipzig and Berlin tearing down a wall; Egypt; Tunisia; Libya; Syria, where a top-down dictator is slaughtering his own people. True legitimate leadership grows from the bottom up.

The second principle they learned was that good and effective leadership is inclusive. In his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, William Willimon points out a detail I had missed before and is easily overlooked. The names of the seven men selected are not Hebrew but Greek: Stephen and Philip, Prochurus, Nicolaus: outsiders to mainstream Jewish culture, looked down on, discriminated against, kept away. It's the first hint that this new thing, this new religion, is going to cross a lot of boundaries and bring down a lot of powerful social barriers. Willimon observes that an important thing happens when outsiders become insiders by being chosen by the community for leadership. It took us a very long time to affirm the full participation of women in all the offices of the church. It is clear that women exercised real leadership and authority in the early church, but we forgot about that for 1,800 years. The modern church talked about it for decades, but change happened when women were elected, ordained to ministry and the offices of the church. I'll never forget the first woman elected Moderator of our General Assembly,

Lois Stair—after 200 years—one of the saints of our church. It happened here, in 1972, with the election of two women, Helen Beiser and Rheba Staggs, to the office of Elder, and the life of this institution began to change dramatically, for the better.

The same dynamic was experienced in regard to race. We talked about racial equality for a long time, but institutional change happened when we elected black elders and ministers and General Assembly moderators.

And we have recently crossed another barrier and brought down another wall with the decision that in the PC(USA) gay and lesbian Presbyterians are no longer second-class citizens but have the same right to leadership as everybody else.

The earliest church discovered that real leaders are servants. These first elected leaders were table waiters. The first one named was Stephen (and I resisted the temptation to title the sermon “Hi! My name is Steve and I’ll be your server this evening”). That’s what they were: servers, servants, and it has taken a really long time but we now know that the best, most effective leadership is servant leadership.

Robert Greenleaf’s ideas are now standard operating procedures at something like one third of the top Fortune 500 businesses, including ServiceMaster, Men’s Warehouse, and Southwest Airlines (see Larry C. Spears “Practicing Servant Leadership,” *Leader to Leader,* Fall 2006)

Greenleaf listed ten characteristics of servant leaders, among them listening; empathy; healing, making whole; awareness; stewardship, holding something in trust for others; commitment to the growth of people; and building community.

One who takes the idea very seriously is Max DePree, Chairman of the Board of Herman Miller, a top Fortune 500 furniture manufacturer.

In his best-selling book *Leadership Jazz,* DePree remembers visiting his new granddaughter, Zoe, in the hospital, born prematurely, weighing one pound, seven ounces. The neonatologist told him that her chances of living were 5 to 10 percent.

She had two IVs in her stomach, another in her foot, a monitor on each side of her chest, and a respirator tube and a feeding tube in her mouth.

Her biological father had jumped ship. A wonderfully wise nurse told DePree, “For the next several months you’re the surrogate father. I want you to come to the hospital every day to visit Zoe, and when you come, I would like you to rub her body and her arms and legs with the tip of your finger. While you’re caressing her, you should tell her how much you love her, because she will connect your voice with your touch.”

DePree remembers, “The nurse was doing exactly the right thing on Zoe’s behalf (and mine as well) and, without knowing it she was giving me one of the best possible descriptions of the work of a leader.”

Servant leadership puts people first. Its fundamental element is care, care for all those who are touched by the organization, beginning with its own employees. People thrive in servant leadership organizations. But there is plenty of evidence that companies that practice servant leadership do better financially than those still adhering to the older, top-down, hierarchical model (see *Let's Coach: On the Path to Excellence, Servant Leadership*)

You know, it's not just a management technique; it's a good idea in personal relationships of any kind—in marriage, partnering, parenting, in teaching, in doctoring and nursing, in the work place—to focus on the needs of the other and ask, "What can I do to be helpful?" to listen carefully, to pay attention, to look intently, focus not on yourself but the other.

As I read Greenleaf's ten characteristics of a servant leader I thought, that's what we hope ministers will be, but also teachers, professionals of all kinds. It's what the Christian church is supposed to be.

From the very beginning, at its best, the church of Jesus Christ has understood itself not as the privileged bastion of the morally perfect and theologically correct, but as an organization whose purpose is to serve its own members and the world around it in the name of the one who came "not to be served but to serve." The church is the place where good news about God's love is celebrated, proclaimed and expressed not only in words, but in acts of humble service: bread broken and offered, shelter and clothing, compassionate acceptance, forgiveness, healing. The church is only the church as it lives for others.

We have elected, from our community, by our community, officers to lead and to lead by serving. And in the same rite as that employed 2,000 years ago when seven men were chosen to lead by waiting on tables, we will lay hands on them and give them the right to lead us in the very important days of transition ahead for our church.

The more I think about it—and I am thinking about it a lot these days—I realize that one of the most remarkable and provocative things Jesus ever said was this: "You did not choose me, but I chose you." In the deepest sense we believe that God has a hand in the process, that God calls men and women to leadership through the voice of the church. And beyond and before that, I believe God comes to each one of us. God intrudes in our lives. God prods, pushes, nags, calls each of us, not all of us to be officers or ministers, but I believe God calls all of us and each of us to live fully, passionately, compassionately, courageously the lives we have been given to live. I believe God comes to us and calls us sometimes though our impatience with the way things are in the world. I believe God calls us in our anger at injustice, our care for the weakest and most vulnerable. I believe God calls us in our love for our children, our spouses, our dearest ones, calls us to serve them and to the best of our ability protect them and provide for them, to do everything we can to assure that their lives are safe and secure and full. I believe God calls us in our hunger for peace in the world and justice in our city and wholeness in our own lives. It is difficult to describe, and most of us are uncomfortable trying to talk about it. But at the heart of our faith is the trust that God comes to us, challenges us, summons us,

calls us to live as God’s men and women, servants, servant leaders, whatever we do, every day of our lives.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you,” Jesus said.

Amen.